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O'Malley May Add Immigration Czar to Cabinet

Gov. Martin O'Malley says he's inclined to create a cabinet-level ombudsman position to deal with the needs of Maryland's growing immigrant population, after a council he commissioned to study the issue recommended that and other new programs on Thursday.

"I don't think it's too much to ask," he said, adding that he would have to study how the state might be able to afford a staff for the new post even as he contemplates state employee furloughs and other budget cuts to close the remainder an estimated \$700 million shortfall.

"Sometimes there are five or six people doing jobs in various departments that if elevated and given focus, can get the job done much better," he said in Rockville at the conclusion of his "Capital for a Day" program that drew about 200 people for an open-air cabinet meeting in the city's Town Square.

Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett, one of two co-chairs for the Maryland Council for New Americans, used the gathering to unveil the recommendations of the report O'Malley commissioned early last year.

The full report, titled "A Fresh Start, Improving Immigrant Integration for a Stronger Maryland," is expected to be released next month.

According to Leggett, 45 percent of all Maryland immigrants live in Montgomery County; and 30 percent of residents in Rockville are foreign-born. The demographics of those groups don't reflect the current perception of immigrants, he said.

Maryland's immigrant workers are more likely to have college degrees than their native counterparts (43 percent to 36 percent), according to the draft report. Some 27 percent are scientists, 21 percent are health care workers and 19 percent are computer specialists. According to the report, a third of the state's maintenance workers and a quarter of the construction, agriculture and food workers are immigrants.

In all, immigrants have accounted for 96 percent of Maryland's work force growth in the past decade.

State Labor Secretary Thomas E. Perez, the council's other co-chair, noted that the immigrant population also is more diverse than many may expect.

It's near equal parts Hispanic (29 percent), Asian (28 percent) and African (25 percent), according to the report.

"People think this is a Latino thing, and it's not," Perez said.

Leggett said he thinks a cabinet-level "Office for New Americans" is critical for the state to maintain its commitment to helping immigrants through future administration changes.

"What we're dealing with in Montgomery County will soon be identical to what the entire state will be experiencing," he said. "We have a chance to do it right, to be an example."

In addition to the cabinet post, the report calls for:

- Establishing and funding "a robust coordinated citizenship initiative."
- Reducing financial burdens on legal permanent residents pursuing citizenship.
- Creating "New American Welcome Centers" to coordinate immigrants' aid.
- Strengthening and standardizing English training statewide.
- Reducing frauds and scams that prey on immigrants.